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Where is the space for talking about death? What kind of space is created when a broken, bereaved body is in the room? What is the responsibility of the spectator, or the critic, in relation to these bodies? In relation to those who are mourning, or distressed, or non-productive, what would it mean to foster an ongoing dynamic of nurturing, rather than a case-by-case procedure of recovery? Where are the implied limits of so-called 'socially engaged practice', and how might these limits be tested?

On 2 February 2008, I drove with artist Doran George to his family's home in Northamptonshire in order to collect several boxes of objects which had belonged to Doran's father. These boxes were set aside following his father's death in 2006, and Doran had never seen the contents. As one part of a six-month residency at Chisenhale Dance Space investigating experimental dance as an approach to understanding bereavement, Doran planned to open these boxes for the first time in front of a public audience and form an improvisation around their contents. This presentation would be called *Dancing with a Dead Man's Things*. As we drove back, we recorded a conversation about Doran's personal grieving process in relation to the possibilities and restrictions of an artist's social role.

Doran: *I'm clear about what this is for me on an artistic level. It's an emotionally demanding and traumatic moment for me, and as an artist I'm interested in asking audiences to engage with that, and... I suppose this is the conceit of the residency – I'm interested in the potential of bringing the traumatised body – the body in trauma – into the frame, as a way of changing the terms of the frame, but also changing the terms of trauma. [...] But I've realised that, of course, I have my own real needs in this situation. I need validation that this is a scary thing for me, that I'm going through a real bereavement process. But artistically, I also have a need for validation that's quite separate from the nature of the traumatic event. And that need for validation is a primal, fairly human need. Like [my cousin's] need for us to enjoy her house, validate that she lives in a nice house or my mum's need for us to validate her soup, that it's a tasty soup. They're fairly mundane needs for validation, but they're still needs for validation.*

Theron (a little later): *When you were talking about validation, I was thinking about this weird knife-edge that the performer has to walk. On the one hand, you can dismiss a piece because it's too personal. You can see something and just say, oh, that is just an artist working through his or her issues, and it's not art, or whatever. But you can also dismiss something because it's not personal enough. This comes up a lot in identity politics. What right does that person have to speak about this? To represent blackness? Or otherness? Or queerness? And so on. [...] So it's a balancing act. And, in terms of negotiating that balance, I was thinking about the possibility of [the need for] validation being something which extends to the audience as well: validating the audience. In those examples you gave about your cousin and the house, or your mother and the soup, what's going on there is not only, 'somebody likes my house' or 'somebody likes my soup', but for the person being offered it's 'somebody likes my opinion'. Or, 'I matter to this person'. In performance, quite a crucial feeling, one that isn't always there, is the sense that, as an audience, you matter to the performer. And this two-way experience of validation might be what can negotiate that balance between being too personal and not being personal enough.*

Doran's residency, called *The Mourner's Dance*, was supported under Chisenhale's Interface programme, which sought to bring questions and practices from artistic fields into relationship with those from fields not usually considered artistic. In addition to *Dancing with a Dead Man's*

Things, the activities Doran undertook through the residency included investigative dialogue and intensive workshops, and concluded in a two-day symposium co-hosted by Chisenhale Dance Space and Queen Mary, University of London. In these different facets, the residency explored the relation performance practice might have to individual processes of recovery from bereavement, as well as the wider implications of the way grief is situated culturally. Doran's own bereavement – both his experience of it and the use of the history of his practice to work with it – formed the foundation of his research and methodology for the residency.

As a critical writer, I approached Doran at the beginning of the residency because of my own interest in work which blurs the boundaries between that which is clearly art practice and that which has an officially recognised social or community agenda. We talked and wrote to each other throughout the residency, and I have also interviewed workshop participants and collaborators. Through this process, a shift has occurred in my conception of the relationship between writing and performance practice. In many ways, this shift has paralleled some of the difficulties and discoveries of the residency, and has changed my understanding of what I am doing right here, with these words, on this page.

Here are these words. They are a record of a conversation. Of the thoughts that were words when they were spoken, and then thoughts again. They are a kind of speaking, to which you are listening. They are a kind of standing – the only thing left standing, in fact, after the silence with which our conversation ended.

From an email from Theron to Doran, 8 November 2007

Writing about Doran's residency means substituting words for the conversations, actions, and images which have now passed. And so, like all remembrances, this has a memorial function, in which the presence and permanence of these words is in contrast to the absence and ephemerality of that which they describe. All action fades into annihilation, but words survive.

Yet this survival through language is also a kind of surrogation. The eulogy pays tribute, but it also displaces the past and replaces it with the authority of the writing subject. As Michel de Certeau describes in *The Writing of History*, writing is always tainted by death. Predicated on a split between the writing-self and the self-which-is-written, writing 'remains a stranger to itself and is forever deprived of an ontological ground, and therefore it always comes up short or is in excess, always the debtor of a death, ... linked to a name that cannot be owned.' Setting out to commemorate Doran's project, I found myself inevitably caught up in a process of appropriation, the eulogist's dilemma. We directly confronted this abstract problem of the role of the writer, but Doran remained frustrated by the threat of the erasure of the subjects under discussion, even when that erasure was acknowledged while it happened. Where was the place, Doran asked, for 'people who are staggering away from death, from loss, looking for answers, not only how to get on without spouses, children, parents, friends, grandparents, but also searching for a way to understand themselves now that they know everyone has a shelf life, that nothing is guaranteed'? At one point, Doran described himself as feeling 'literally disappointed', and the connection with Certeau's spatial imagery – of displacement, territory, and placelessness – is telling. As I would discover, this project would continually engage with questions of space: the permissiveness of place, the possibility of movement, and the ownership of territory. And as I accompanied the project, my own journey as a writer would transform my conception of the space of writing.

From the outset, *The Mourner's Dance* was challenged by issues of conceptual location within disciplinary practices. A prominent medical figure in the field of recovery was interested in Doran's project, but warned that he would only be able to be involved if there were sufficient controls in place to ensure the welfare of the participants and also to be able to measure the effectiveness of the recovery process – in other words, a strict scientific model in which the effectiveness of a hypothesised outcome could be measured within expected parameters, and in which nothing unexpected could occur. On the other hand, a leading curator within the field of live art practice told Doran that she would be interested in a dialogue about work which was conceived as broader provocation around these issues, but not necessarily work which

was intended to promote specific healing and recovery on a personal level. Instead of bringing together the qualities of different practices, this project seemed to sit outside of them, as the 'other' in relation to which live art and medicine each define themselves. Rather than finding common ground, the project found itself in a kind of no-man's-land: a space which was too vague for medicine, and too specific for art. In many ways this predicament might be typical of so-called socially engaged practice, positioned as either an on-the-cheap version of social benefit, or as an artistic side-project, only given attention when an artist's 'real' work is of sufficiently high cultural value.

But making visible the hidden demarcations of conceptual and material territories is exactly the political remit claimed for visual performance. In *Terra Infirma*, Irit Rogoff articulates the way in which performance, as a kind of spatial practice, can make visible the authorisations that carve up apparently empty space: 'Space, as we have understood it, is always sexual or racial, it is always constituted out of circulating capital and it is always subject to the invisible boundary lines which determine inclusions and exclusions.' Doran's performance practice could be understood as a similar project to that of visual culture, which Rogoff describes as the attempt to 'repopulate space with all the obstacles and all the unknown images which the illusion of transparency evacuated from it... Clearly space is always populated with the unrecognized obstacles which never allow us to actually "see" what is out there beyond what we expect to find.' The medical world expects a recovery; the art world expects a show. But in these valuative frameworks, *The Mourner's Dance* would be a disappointment.

Rather than giving us something to see, Doran struggled with the question of the ways in which we are permitted to see bodies and to present the body – and, for this project in particular, the grieving body. The roles which bodies are permitted to play are very much related to the spaces in which they appear: certain spaces produce certain bodies. So the question of space becomes a critical one, and the creation of specific kinds of spaces became one of the focuses of the residency. In letters and journal entries, Doran described himself as moving away from the health and medicine paradigm, in which the intended goal is 'recovery' and in which therapeutic spaces are abnormal, created outside of everyday life as spaces of recovery. Instead, his interest shifted to an idea of a 'culture of bereavement', in which a paradigm of 'nurturing' would resist the exception-making, normalising practice of 'recovery'. Rather than seeking to recover the bereaved body in order that it could be reincorporated as a productive body, Doran began to conceive of the body as fundamentally always in need of nurture, and to think of bereavement – as a process in which that nurturing can be made explicit and visible – as an opportunity rather than a challenge to the development of the body.

One of the significant elements of the early work in the residency involved the creation of what Doran called a 'congregation of mourning'. Initially with one other person, then with two, and ultimately with an open invitation to anyone interested, participants in the congregation of mourning would use a pre-arranged time to reflect on their bereavement in whatever method and circumstances they chose, then share their experiences in writing afterwards. This virtual congregation did not exist in a designated space but was superimposed over people's everyday spaces: their kitchens and bedrooms, or the city spaces that some of them walked through. But it clearly created a new kind of space for the participants, and in this space people experienced their bodies differently:

There was a moment during which I thought of everyone. I could feel pain, pain about my Dad's death, how much he suffered in the lead up to his death, then I became aware of the other losses in the congregation, some specifics that I knew. I cried, for the first time in one of these.

My Dad's widow came to mind and I could feel a physical sensation in my body that I associate with them. As I felt this I took myself to different people in the congregation.

Doran George, Arnhem, Holland

As long as I was moving I felt really connected to Hannah and loved doing leg wiggles that I used to watch her do, but had never done. But then when I sat still I got a little

itchy and uncomfortable. So I just sat with the uncomfortableness for a while, recognizing how that unbearable edginess is how Hannah lived so much of her life. I sat with it until it eased.

But what came in was that I really needed to sit not just with hannah, but with my mom who died 16 yrs ago and my grandmother who died 14 yrs ago. and somehow all the female relatives that are gone that I loved, and my living sister who will one day be gone if I am not gone before her.

And I can feel all of us in my body, in the ways I hold myself back, in the ways I twist and pull myself in different directions, trying to move forward and hold back at the same time.

Katto Wittich, Los Angeles

For participants in the workshops which Doran ran at Chisenhale over three weekends, the relationship between space and body in relation to mourning was also significant. If bereavement is experienced as a kind of paralysis, an inability to move on from the emotional place where one is stuck, then the approach that Doran took in the workshops was to create spaces in which movement became possible. Reflecting on the workshops, Doran afterwards noted the importance of the creation of spatial boundaries, with different areas of the workshop space being designated for different purposes (such as writing, down time, object work, etc.) and with each participant creating and controlling his or her own workspace. This spatial boundary-setting helped support the task of workshop facilitation, in which material boundaries helped to stabilise the emotional boundary-setting and boundary-crossing which was being undertaken in the workshops. Several of the workshop participants described the overall process in spatial terms: as a journey, or in terms of the distance which the workshop experience allowed them to achieve with relation to their own bereavement, or in terms of being given room for each individual experience.

Performance methodologies helped to establish a space in which exploration and discovery could take place, and in which movement (rather than paralysis) is possible – but they were not necessarily oriented toward any particular outcomes, such as any criteria of artistic usefulness. As Doran noted in a letter to Joao in December 2007, ‘The dancing I’m doing, the movement, does not currently emerge as something I can engage with artistically, it’s surprising, embarrassing, delightful, pleasurable, disconcerting to me on an artistic level, largely because it’s so different from anything I know, like, or could imagine working with.’ This approach very much characterised Doran’s public showing of *Dancing with a Dead Man’s Things* – the piece we talked about in the car – during which Doran met and spoke with the audience in an informal setting before the performance, and then moved us all together into a prepared performance space. This event sat somewhere between ritual and performance, between personal and collective experience. With Doran’s body at the centre of constantly shifting frames of reference, it felt as if we were there for his benefit as much as he was there for ours. (A letter I wrote Doran after the event, reproduced after this article, describes this experience in more detail.)

Returning to the question of the role of the writer, I find myself asking how writing might create a similar kind of space as Doran’s residency was trying to create. The role of the critic is usually to enact a kind of recovery: to recuperate what would otherwise be lost, to reconstitute experience as knowledge, to translate emotions into ideas which can be exchanged and accordingly have exchange-value. But as I spent time with Doran on the residency, we both became aware that my contribution had as much to do with listening as with articulating, and that critical engagement with Doran’s work could function as another way of opening up a space of discovery. Rather than a memorial, let these words serve as a meeting place. A place where, amongst the words which belong to others and the thoughts which belong to you, you can find yourself. A place which does not capture our movements, physical or emotional, but which makes them possible. Amongst this dead and printed text, your breath, your body, your words.

Later in the drive from Northamptonshire:

Theron: *Talking about this, I am reminded of Bill T. Jones' work, and how there was this whole critical uprising against it. The argument that this was beyond criticism, that it's not art anymore. When Jones was working with people who were going to die, people asked, how can you criticise what they have to say? And there was this really vehement reaction against it.*

Doran: *Right. Absolutely.*

I mean, part of the reason they felt robbed of critical distance is because people don't know how to talk about death. So that's not a problem of the work. That's a problem of the context. And that means that the context needs to change. And that's partly why I'm trying to do what I'm trying to do. Because we do need to talk about death. Because talking about death, and being able to engage with mortality is going to change the way that we live our lives. For the better. And I feel really convinced of that.

Doran and Theron created a website which archives various dialogues, resources, and outcomes associated with the project: <http://ordinaryinstant.wordpress.com/>

Response to *Dancing with a Dead Man's Things*

Letter from Theron to Doran, 13 February 2008

It's hard to know what kind of event this is, even as I am watching it. Opening boxes of your father's things, and watching you experience his loss in your face and your body, in your laughter and your weeping, I am moved to sympathy for you. I imagine the personal story behind the objects, imagine your difficult childhood and his difficult fatherhood, make up moments of joy and commonality that you might have had. I think about my own family, about what will be in the boxes I leave behind when I die, about what I will do to mark the passing of my own father. There's an obvious question raised by these boxes and their inevitable, laughable incompleteness: is this what makes up a life? A travel Scrabble game? An apron with a naked woman? An ornamental pewter mug? An unused set of artists' pencils? I wonder how many of these were gifts, and think about the gifts I have received which just sit unused in my desk drawer, and about the gifts I've given my father for which he had no use.

But this is not just a space for reflection, but a space for action. A space for a particular kind of action: performance. It's demarcated from everyday life by the transition from the lounge space, in which you talk to us as if we're all in the same room, and our entry into the performance space, in which dialogue between you and us seems inappropriate. It's a space further separated by the beautiful arrangement of the space: the objects and your body shrouded in white (not black); the clock on the wall ticking time away; the cast breasts below the clock suggesting mothering, nurture, wholeness, purity; the sound of recorded birdsong casting the space outward from itself. The presence of a filmmaker also works to separate performance from everyday life: it suggests that there is something in this place and for a fixed time which warrants recording.

So, in addition to my sympathy for you and my thoughts about myself, another thing that is going on is me watching you make a performance out of these materials. And there are some very striking moments, some resonant connections you discover in your improvisation. The moment near the end when you use red paint from your father's paint set to make a St George cross on your chest, recalling the very early object (the first object?) pulled from the box: an English national flag. The first flag is somewhat funny and somewhat loathsome, tragic in a way which is everyday and banal just as racism, as an abstract ubiquity, is both tragic and banal. The second flag has more rich layers of meaning, as I imagine you taking your father's beliefs into your own body: you may not like them but your body is partly his. Your exit from the space is similarly evocative. Having discovered a (military?) patch with a bird wing on it, you circle the room, stepping lightly, the wing sticking out of the corner of your mouth, and then leave. We are left, holding the eggs you gave us, listening to birdsong, with the painting of a bird made by your father blacked over on the wall.

These are rich moments, moments which I can appreciate, even savour, as a spectator to a performance. But at the same time I question that enjoyment, question my own complicity in a process which transformed personal grief into public spectacle. There's a satisfaction in this improvised connections, but I am also disquieted by my own satisfaction. I am not here to see a performance. As you said in your introduction to the audience, this work is not about illustrating grief. To put it simply, I do not want to evaluate this event only on the basis of how well you perform. It helps that you perform well, but what is it that it helps? There is more going on, more that is suggested.

One of the elements of this 'more' is something which can only happen over time, the way in which improvisation necessarily takes its time to discover something. The way in which improvisation can, in some sense, 'waste' time – so that in watching events like this we often see a lot which fails to coalesce, or which is derivative of other such events, but which unexpectedly gives way to some small moment which is new. In

your sharing, this happened in the way you began to move your body towards the end of the time together, particularly as you held the four boules to your face and the breathtaking, bacchanalian stomping dance which ensued. What came across here was a way in which you started to take in these objects, not through looking at them or thinking about them and their memories, but through what seemed like a very deep bodily connection. This seemed more profound than a casual sensuality – it was more than you just holding them to your face, more than just finding new ways of you, as you, experiencing them, as them. Instead there was a strong connection between your body as object and the balls as objects. (I think now of similar thoughts watching incredible moments of butoh, when it seems as if the performer is somehow trying to escape from his or her own skin, or indeed as if the flesh itself is dancing, trying to dance, trying to get away from the performer.)

And on quite a different note, something else which I left wondering about was this very question: what are we watching? What have you invited us to watch? What are you achieving by making the kind of separation of the performance and the performance space, which I described above? What might it mean for people to have gathered to watch this performance, as opposed to inviting friends, or strangers, to be with you as you opened the boxes? The relationship with the spectators (as spectators) unquestionably affects the experience – but what ‘uses’ might this effect have? What discovery is made possible by this performance separation?

I don’t have any answers here, but I want to keep asking this question as the residency goes on. One of the things which is challenged is the question of who this is for. Performance is usually presented as something for the spectator. In the case of what you are doing, maybe it is about letting us be there for you. Rather than seeing an already-recovered body, we are there at the site of recovery-in-process. We are there to nurture. This is your gift for us – that we get to be there for you.